

# Breakers Ahead! by Jack Lait

REGULATIONS against one-piece bathing suits, unstockinged calves and such things did not apply on the private beach of the private school maintained by the Misses Brainerd. "Kellerman" outfits are, of course, as sensible and sane for the feds as anything more than nature's own cuticle could be; only in spots where male eyes may see need there be any restrictions against them. And male eyes couldn't see at the Brainerd beach.

That is, male eyes shouldn't have seen. For there was no approach from land except through the grounds and buildings of the seminary, and from the sea no boat could come within a quarter-mile because the ships was so gradual. Swimmers were held back by wire ropes which enclosed the borders of the estate, and the girls were held within the confines of ropes far inside those cables.

So the pretty naiads from every State in the Union, making up the personnel of the Brainerd Institute of culture, erudition, mental buffing, ethical refining and spiritual conditioning, lolled on the snobbish sands and pranked in the pre-empted waters, sighingly secure from thrilling intrusion.

Every day was ladies' day. It was monotonous, but it was inviolate. And youth finds its distractions in no matter what circumstances and within any barriers of confinement.

There were always water-timid ones to duck and splash, and breast-stroke races to be waged, and medicine-ball sets to be contested. The triumphs were hollow, as all triumphs always must be unless some element of romance may enter somewhere; and the defeats were stingless in the same ratio. Not that the girls were lovesick or men-crazy, but they were from sixteen on to twenty, and they would have thought, talked and banded the fellows had they been on a maleless desert island.

A mile or more off was a military academy.

Any reader who has gone thus far in this narrative must have guessed that a male school had to be near the Brainerd haven. The situation is too pat for any professional short-story writer to pass up, and the long preliminary about how carefully the girls were guarded against the men must have already wigwagged to the alert audience that the point of this tale will be at least one Romeo running the blockade. Bless you, that's exactly what it is to be.

In order, however, to make the situation more plausible, we will reveal that the Misses Brainerd's finishing school was on a bark of the Hudson. And everyone knows that the banks of the Hudson are strewn with private schools, even as the "sign here" line is punctuated with dots, so it was quite logical that the Custer Cavalry Academy should be nearby.

For many a year the Misses Brainerd had lost sleep through this propinquity. Subdebs entrusted to their chaperonage and tutelage had to be guarded like so many pupils of so many eyes, not to say pupils of one school. And, over the hurdles of watchfulness, there had now and again sprung romances between the charming maidens of Brainerd and the dashing youths of Custer.

In addition to their duty as sentries over the affairs of their charges, the Misses Brainerd had a constitutional hostility against contact of the sexes. They were spinsters, by disposition, choice and estate. They had never, themselves, experienced any urge or even tolerance toward that popular mystery labeled "love," and they fought it as they did mosquitoes, boiler explosions, the flu or any other of the pestiferous perils of life in a world which they unfortunately could not shape according to their set ideas.

They had frequently conferred with Major Garrelson, commandant at Custer, over clandestine approaches of his boys and their girls.

The major, a hearty old vet who understood young fellows, had in the best of faith promised that he would do his best to keep the adolescent cavaliers who wore the uniform of his establishment from annoying the sisters Brainerd and from flirting with the girls of Brainerd. But he always told the agitated schoolmistresses that all that he could do and all that they could do, combined, would never quite accomplish the wish they expressed, that their girls should go through their semesters without as much as seeing a man.

"Ladies," the major said, "I recognize and thoroughly approve your policy. And I shall do all within my power to help you maintain it. But, though you know girls better than I am afraid I do, I might venture to say that I know boys, after having been one myself, and after having reared succeeding generations of them.

"My lads are, largely, of the spirited type. They come of the wealthier classes, precocious, assertive.

"They know that, less than a mile off, are a hundred pretty young women. They know that these young women have been placed where they are with the understanding that they are to be kept away from male associations. They know that walls and chains and cables and bars have been put up around those girls to keep boys—my boys as well as others, and probably more so—from them.

"Now, what spunky young chaps in such circumstances could do less than try to meet those girls?"

To this the Misses Brainerd always shook their heads and pressed their bloodless lips together and audibly wondered why these wild boys should be so insubordinate, when they knew that they were specifically forbidden to make advances toward the Brainerd students. The major tried to hint, gently and gallantly, that maybe that was just what the boys schemed and conspired to court the Brainerd students. But that was understandable to the academic ladies, and so he never pressed the point.

The major, in truth, did not encourage or even condone such breaches for his rules were, technically, as strict as the others'. But he lost no sleep over it. He had realized that eternal vigilance can carry on only so far. And he knew that never in history had a nation, at war, been able to sustain a blockade that the enemy could not penetrate, not to speak of perfecting a 100 per cent Chinese wall between a boys' school and a girls' school.

In winter the problem wasn't so knotty and spotty. But in the Spring, when the buds began to bloom, when romance

and adventure and hanky-panky crackled in the air, when swimming time invited into the water and strolling time beckoned into the by-paths and the forest patches, the night-guard was doubled and the day watch was strengthened.

There was no village within easy distance, and so there was no neutral ground where the students of the two institutions could have easily met. The Custer boys were given brief leave from time to time, but the Brainerd girls never crossed the outposts of their own grounds except to go to their homes for holidays and term periods, at which times they were taken en masse in buses to the nearest station, and there seen aboard.

But in eight years eleven Custers had married as many Brainerds as the happy outcome of romances initiated in school-day meetings, and in several of these instances there had been elopements before school was "out." One of these had engaged

And now Summer was on. June had come. And June was the month of mischief and mating. With the near approach of the school year-end, there was, at the same already unpropitious time, a sag in school efficiency and an ebb in disciplinary morale.

A note sent from a Custer boy to one of the seminary girls in a package of excelsior had been intercepted. The note indicated that the writer had already met the writee twice. The package had been mailed by the cadet to a friend in a distant city, to be addressed there and remailed to the girl, so the postmark might get it by. But it had been opened, as were all parcels and all letters unless they were in envelopes especially designed by the Brainerds and supplied to families of their charges.

One of the girls had been betrayed by a Brainerd house-

the gravel path toward the administration headquarters in staccato strides.

Into the office of the perturbed Misses Brainerd he came like a bombshell. The spinsters, who were "in conference," acidulously yammering over the skidding and downfall of Julia Laven, were flabbergasted as the pudgy military man wheeled right and entered, saluted and said:

"What is the meaning of the communication which I just received?"

There were a couple of gasped "whys," and the elder Miss Brainerd rose to her feet.

"Men are not permitted in these grounds, Major," she quavered.

"Tommyrot, madame," answered the Major. "There are a lot of things not permitted in these grounds that I cannot subscribe to. However, here I am. Now, since you have notified me that one of my boys has caused you great anxiety and has brought a great injury upon one of your girls, I have a right to know what it's all about."

"But—"

"Yes, ma'am. I concede whatever you are about to say, before you say it. Now, what's the rumpus?"

And the Major sat down. One of the Brainerds, capitulating in view of the defenselessness of the institution against rough men who might force their way in, laconically handed the note to the Major. He read it several times.

"What the—what does it mean?" he asked.

"We do not know," answered one of the schoolmistresses.

"Why not ask the girl?"

"We did. She stubbornly refuses to decipher it. We would suggest that you ask the young scapegrace to whom it was addressed."

The Major laughed aloud. "You don't think, I hope, that one of my lads—a soldier and a gentleman—would reveal what a lady wrote him in code?"

"If he doesn't, sir, he should be summarily dismissed."

"And if he does, madame, he'll be drummed out of Custer. Good heavens, ladies, haven't you any sense of honor at all? Is there nothing to you in this life except that rubbish that you worship, which you erroneously choose to stamp as propriety? You would ask a man to violate a confidence with a girl who trusted him at least as far as to arrange a cipher with him? Well, you may; I will not."

"Your attitude, sir, is quite incredible. One of your students has violated every rule of our school—and yours, if we may believe what you have said heretofore—and you propose to let him off scot free?"

"Not at all. I propose to reprimand him. But I do not propose to intrude on his privilege of privacy, not to mention on the young woman's even more sacred right to her own secrets. And I should advise that you pursue the same policy, if I may make a suggestion."

"We thank you for the suggestion. We had considered dealing lightly with Julia—with Miss Laven—if she had explained the significance of those numerals. It is near to graduation and a light infraction might be forgiven. But, as long as she will not enlighten us, we are quite unable to judge the gravity of the offense. How do we know that she has not met this boy, and that this note, if properly interpreted, would uncover this?"

"Very well, ladies, work it out. But, please, do not look to me for any substantial assistance. I am as wholeheartedly against laxity and indiscriminate association of the sexes under unfavorable conditions as you could be. But I cannot and will not grant that when a fine lad and an upstanding girl become acquainted and begin courting or billing or sweethearting, that it must be wrong, per se. Good day."

The sisters sat silent for a while. When they recovered their asthmatic breaths, they talked and talked, and finally agreed that perhaps the good of the school might be best served if Julia Laven were denied all privileges until graduation but permitted to remain and go with her certificate and the other girls, out of the life of the Brainerds.

Word to this effect was sent to Julia, who was already preparing to go home. She inquired why this unexpected reprieve had come, just before the execution. The Misses Brainerd declined to explain that it was justice—plain justice. The commandant of Custer had refused to dismiss the boy to whom the note had been addressed. Why, then, should the girl bear all the punishment for an offense that must have been two-sided, in a measure at least?

"Oh,shaw," exclaimed Julia, stamping her foot.

The spinsters looked at her in astonishment.

"Just one question," said Julia. "Did Tom—I mean did the gentleman to whom I addressed the letter—did he tell what it meant?"

"Probably not. When the Major left here he had refused to even ask him."

"Oh, then, Tom doesn't know what the note contained?"

"Probably not. We trust not."

And Julia stamped her other foot. "It's too late to mend it then, I suppose. Now I'll tell you the truth about it. Tom and I are engaged—have been for years and years. Our parents know all about it, and approve. And if you think that '3 at 8' means anything spooky or surreptitiously romantic, you are in error. It is only a tip on the horses."

"A what? On which?"

"Oh, come to life. Don't you know that the girls—yes, the Brainerd girls for a decade—have been betting on horses, and managing to get their money placed? I have a friend in Chicago who gets the most wonderful information. So I have been letting Tommy in on some of it."

"The words '3 at 8' mean to bet the third race at Belmont, which is track 8 in a private list we compiled. He would see the horses in that race and bet the one he has on the opposite side of the list who runs in that race. It's a horse name Maybloom—and she's a pip. Why don't you girls put down a piker's portion and play her across the boards? She's a—"

But the Brainerd sisters were retreating backward.



So the Pretty Naiads from Every State in the Union Lolled on the Snobbish Sands and Pranked in the Pre-empted Waters, Sighingly Secure from Thrilling Intrusion.

keeper, to whom she had given a letter to be mailed outside, addressed to a student officer at Custer. The employee, like all the Brainerd servants, had been trained in the almost airtight spy system of the seminary, and she had turned the cryptic communication in to "the office." With astonished eyes the Misses Brainerd read:

"3 at 8."

Julia Laven was summoned to the principals' office.

She readily admitted having sent the note. But she refused flatly to interpret it or to discuss how she had come to be acquainted with the Custer boy for whom it was meant.

The major was immediately advised. A message was sent to the effect that, because of the misbehavior of one of his students, a hitherto unblemished young woman was about to be dismissed from the seminary in disgrace, a fortnight or less before commencement, sans diploma, sans honorable discharge, sans the lily-white perfection which must clothe every girl who would march forth from Brainerd with the other spotless ones.

The major listened and boiled.

Then he thought it over a moment, banged his hairy fist upon his desk, ordered a car and rode over to Brainerd. A watchwoman held him up at the gate and gave him a piece of paper with printed questions as to whom he might be and what he might want, which he was to fill out before he could be admitted. But the major banded it back through the pigeonhole, and, before the eyes of the astonished matron, he vaulted his puffy figure right over the fence and started up

the interests of the newspapers through the whole land, due to the prominence of the young heroess and the athletic fame of the young hero, and this had caused untold anguish unto the sisters Brainerd, who had assured Major Garrelson that the reputation of their school, the reputation they had so assiduously, consistently and painfully striven to establish, had been shredded by this most deplorably notorious incident.

The major reddened and was about to say that maybe mothers of cadets were just as perturbed about having their sons rush seminary girls as the girls' mothers might be to have them wooed by uniformed youths. But he only said that he was sorry—so deeply sorry; it had, indeed, been extremely unfortunate.